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Transcendence, Morality, and History: Emmanuel Levinas and the Discovery of Søren Kierkegaard in France

[I]n France he is all but unknown . . . [yet] Kierkegaard's ideas are fated to play a great role in the spiritual development of mankind. It is true that this role is of a special kind. He will hardly be accepted among the classics of philosophy . . . but his thought will find a place, unseen, in the hearts of men.

—Lev Shestov¹

When she asked why I had chosen Kierkegaard as an object of study and I replied that I did not know, Rachel Besspaloff said: "But don't you realize? It is because you are a Jew."

—Jean Wahl²

INTRODUCTION

To judge from his postwar essays on the subject, Emmanuel Levinas rejected the founder of existentialism with no little irritation. Where Søren Kierkegaard interpreted Isaac's binding, in *Fear and Trembling*, as a parable about the role of faith in taking the self beyond the merely ethical stage, Levinas suggested that it is not Abraham's hand, ready to bring the knife to his son's throat, but instead "Abraham's ear for hearing the voice" that best captures the intent of the biblical story. It "brought him back to the ethical order." As Levinas explained it: "That [Abraham] obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient

1. Lev Shestov, *Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentielle (Vox clamantis in deserto)* (Paris: Vrin, 1936), 35–36. Throughout this article, all translations are my own, unless indicated otherwise.

2. Jean Wahl, "Discours de clôture," in Éliane Amado-Valensi and Jean Halperin, eds., *La conscience juive. Données et débats: Textes des trois premiers Colloques d'intellectuels juifs de langue française organisés par la Section française du Congrès juif mondial* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 225.

distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is the essential.”³

The conflict in biblical interpretation mirrors their difference in philosophical outlook. Where Kierkegaard recommended, in a famous phrase, the “teleological suspension of the ethical,” Levinas has become celebrated for the recovery and reinstatement of morality in philosophy. Where Kierkegaard narrated the existential drama of the self, Levinas dedicated his attention, with equal but apparently opposite fervency, to the so-called other. “[H]e bequeathed to the history of philosophy,” Levinas complained of the Danish thinker, “an exhibitionistic, immodest subjectivity” (PN, 76). Opposing the solitary—and in his view, narcissistic and melodramatic—quest of the knight of faith, Levinas recommended the calm and healthy solicitude of interpersonal morality, “[t]he responsibility that rids the I of its imperialism and egotism (even the egotism of salvation)” (PN, 73). The pious submission to the other: this adventure, for Levinas, is paradoxically the most adventurous one available to the self.

Yet when the matter is considered more closely and historically, Kierkegaard’s philosophical contribution turns out in many respects to be a major if unexpected station on the long way to the human other. In his portrait of the infinite qualitative difference between God and man, Kierkegaard set a crucial precedent for the notion of human “alterity” that Levinas is so renowned for defending. And in severing the individual from the all-inclusiveness of the historical process so that the self could search for this strangely distant god, Kierkegaard anticipated Levinas’s own opposition to a fully historical and world-immanent picture of human existence.

For his most passionate contemporary advocates, Levinas’s doctrine of “the other” is an utterly novel and wholly convincing approach; it finally unseated a long-standing if not permanent Western bias for “the same.” I doubt that either the historical presumption or the moral evaluation is entirely correct. In this essay, I will endeavor to show that it is possible to understand Levinas’s philosophy as a secularizing improvisation on Kierkegaard’s early call for the recovery of the other in divine form. But the Kierkegaardian precedent is responsible, I will sug-

3. These comments are from Emmanuel Levinas, “Existenz und Ethik,” *Schweizer Monatshefte* 43 (May 1963): 170–77 and in Jean-Paul Sartre et al., *Kierkegaard vivant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 232–34, 286–88, both rpt., the latter with important changes, in *Noms propres* (see PN, 74, 77).

gest, not only for some of the power but also for some of the poverty in Levinas's philosophical ethics.

After a summary reconstruction of the French enthusiasm for Kierkegaard's thought, I turn to two neglected episodes in Levinas's engagement with the interwar fashion. The essential purpose of the study is to remember forgotten debates in order to assert their importance as evidence regarding Levinas's development generally and the role that Kierkegaard and Kierkegaardianism specifically played in it. The thesis throughout is that the Levinasian insistence on "transcendence" has a conceptual history. The process through which it came to occupy the center of Levinas's thought also, I hope, helps account for some persisting mysteries about Levinas's conception of alterity. Just as Kierkegaard's picture of the relationship between God and man is secularized by Levinas as the very image of intersubjectivity, making it an essentially dyadic affair, Kierkegaard's absolute distinction between self and history found itself transformed, in Levinas's hands, into just as rigid a difference between morality and politics. If these mysteries are understood as flaws, then the Kierkegaardian lessons that Levinas learned may well turn out to have obstructed as much as they enabled his insight.

THE FRENCH ENTHUSIASM FOR KIERKEGAARD

Levinas became a philosopher in the midst of Europe's interwar experience. Though Kierkegaard's work had percolated throughout the continent during the several decades after his death, it is really only thanks to the German interwar discovery of his philosophy that he became the canonical figure he remains today. It is possible, almost, to say that Kierkegaard is a twentieth-century rather than a nineteenth-century philosopher. "If we were to write a history of his fame," Hannah Arendt observed in 1932,

only the last fifteen years would concern us, but in those years his fame has spread with amazing speed. This fame rests on more than the discovery and belated appreciation of a great man who was wrongly neglected in his own time. We are not just making amends for not having done him justice earlier. Kierkegaard speaks with a contemporary voice; he speaks for an entire generation that is not reading him out of historical interest but for intensely personal reasons: *mea res agitur*.⁴

4. Hannah Arendt, "Søren Kierkegaard," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 29 January 1932, rpt.

This enthusiasm for Kierkegaard's work, in turn, owed its success to the prominence of the major Kierkegaardian of post-World War I Europe: Karl Barth. The reception of Kierkegaard's thought, which came only in a drizzle up to the appropriation in Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* and related writings, is unthinkable without Barth's stormy personality and instant fame.⁵ Then publications by and about the Dane poured forth from the German presses in a torrent. Kierkegaard has no doubt had no more significant heyday than in the German intellectual life of the 1920s. It is less well known, but the French had their own Kierkegaard enthusiasm—only, as with their reception of phenomenology, it occurred after a significant delay and with some creative garbling. But historically speaking, it may have proved more consequential as the font from which international "existentialism" eventually flowed. What I am arguing in this essay is that, paradoxically enough, it also contributed decisively to the more recent interest in philosophical ethics. A general overview is therefore in order.⁶

The translation of Kierkegaard into French had been spotty and often corrupt, especially by comparison to Germany where, by the mid-1920s, readers could benefit from the celebrated edition of Kierkegaard's complete works, translated by Hermann Gottsched and Christoph Schrempf, that the Jena publisher Eugen Diederichs brought out over the decade and a half ending in 1924. By contrast, only in 1932 did

in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn, trans. Robert and Rita Kimmer (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1993), 44.

5. The authoritative study of the Kierkegaard reception before Barth is Habib C. Malik, *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard: The Early Impact and Transmission of His Thought* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1997). On Barth's connection, see Anders Gemmers and August Messer, *Søren Kierkegaard und Karl Barth* (Stuttgart: Strecker und Schröder, 1925) and Egon Brinkschmidt, *Søren Kierkegaard und Karl Barth* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1971).

6. I have drawn principally on the following accounts: Jean Mesnard, "Kierkegaard aux prises avec la conscience française," *Revue de littérature comparée* 9 (1955): 453–77; Nelly Viallaneix, "Lectures françaises," in Niels and Marie Thulstrup, eds., *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 8, *The Legacy and Interpretation of Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1981), and Jean Wahl, "Kierkegaard: Son influence en France," *Revue danoise* (1951): 34–36. See also François Bousquet, "Kierkegaard dans la tradition théologique francophone," in Niels Jørgen Cappeløm and Jon Steward, eds., *Kierkegaard Revisited* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), and F. J. Belleskov Jansen, "The Study in France," in Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, ed., *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 15, *Kierkegaard Research* (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1987). See also Jacques Maritain, "Aspects contemporains de la pensée religieuse (I)," *Fontaine* 31 (1943): 18–33, esp. 22–28 on Kierkegaard, Barth, and Shestov; in English as "Contemporary Renewals in the Modern World," in Maritain et al., *Religion and the Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941).

a complete rendering of any one of Kierkegaard's many books first appear in France, *The Sickness unto Death* under the title *Traité du désespoir* in a translation by Jean Gâteau and Knud Ferlov. A complete edition appeared only decades later. There had been, it is true, scattered and fragmentary translations—as well as interpretive essays by Victor Basch and Henri Delacroix—before World War I.⁷ Only around 1930, however, did anything change—and then, as Nelly Viallaneix observes, “everything changed.”

The sociology of knowledge invalidates what Kierkegaard himself insinuates. While the reader's experience seems to be personal, a dialogue between himself and the text, it is usually intelligible only as part of a trend. “It is from this date forward,” Viallaneix remarks of 1930, “that Kierkegaard's renown really spread in France—just at the same time as France entered a ‘crisis’ not only economic but social and political in form. The anxiety of these *années sombres*, nourished by the rise of Nazism and the expectation of a new war, made the Kierkegaardian myth powerful. Translations and interpretations multiplied.” The kind of context that had made Kierkegaard (like Barth himself) so popular a decade earlier in a defeated Germany now came to a France wracked by depression and increasing political and social polarization. With due allowance for the salient differences between the two moments, it is nonetheless true that the political upheaval of these years helped foster, for many, the cultural mood so inseparable from the Kierkegaardian interest and enthusiasm on the German scene a decade earlier.⁸

In religious circles, the German enthusiasm had special impact on Protestant theology. In this case, the reception of Kierkegaard often blended almost indistinguishably with the apotheosis of Barth himself in French thought. The key Kierkegaardian texts in Barth's collection *The Word of God and the Word of Man* appeared in French in 1933.⁹ The two major journals of French Protestantism—*Foi et vie* and *Le semeur*—likewise celebrated and debated Kierkegaard and Barth in the early 1930s. Denis de Rougemont, a Swiss writer with close links to

7. Henri Delacroix, “Søren Kierkegaard,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 8/4 (1900): 451–84; Victor Basch, “Un individualiste religieux, Søren Kierkegaard,” *Grande revue* (1903): 281–320. Levinas knew these publications; see below.

8. Viallaneix, “Lectures françaises,” 108–9. Similarly, Wahl himself says that “one can in fact see that [Kierkegaard's fame] has grown especially since about 1930” (Wahl, “Kierkegaard,” 34).

9. Barth, *Parole de Dieu, parole humaine*, trans. Pierre Maury and Auguste Lavanchy (Paris: Editions “Je sers,” 1933).

French Protestantism (as well as to the nascent Collège de Sociologie), not only published his own studies of Kierkegaard but also founded a theological review called *Hic et Nunc*, explicitly modeled on Kierkegaard's own controversial series of pamphlets, *The Moment*.¹⁰

Rougemont's collaborator in this editorial venture, later an important theorist of religion and Islam scholar named Henry Corbin, joined the fray, too, learning Danish and translating Barth as well as publishing a number of articles in *Hic et Nunc* in preparation for his important tract on the subject, which appeared in *Recherches philosophiques* in 1934. This article merits special mention in light of the theme of the nonhistorical individual. Corbin's article proved among the highest-profile introductions to the new German theology of the "wholly other" on the French scene. It made the Kierkegaardian case for transcendence and against history with vigor. "The twofold task of religious philosophy which emerged from the *Aufklärung*," Corbin explained, "was the insertion of divine transcendence into the flux of history and the reduction of human existence to a generality." But, Corbin insisted, "the testimony of dialectical theology tends to show definitively how divine transcendence, which is forever outside history, i.e. non-historical, can only *reveal* itself as a concrete relation to concrete men." For this reason, instead of allowing itself to be accessed through history, the transcendent other is in fact "the foundation of the historicity of every concrete individuality."¹¹ A frequent contributor to *Recherches philosophiques*, the famous (if short-lived) journal co-founded by his friend Alexandre Koyré, Levinas would, I believe, certainly have known of the article. But very little hangs on the connection: similar notions about the priority of the wholly other to history were soon to be everywhere.

Indeed, the Kierkegaard enthusiasm did not only penetrate theological circles; it also found a deep foothold in the philosophical discussions of the time. The Kierkegaardian influence on various German philosophers now discussed so intensely in France, leaving aside for a moment studies of Kierkegaard himself, could hardly have been more

10. See, for example, Denis de Rougemont, "Kierkegaard en France," *La nouvelle revue française* 46/273 (1936): 971–76. On *Hic et Nunc*, see Bernard Reymond, *Théologien ou prophète?: Les Francophones et Karl Barth avant 1945* (Lausanne: L'âge d'homme, 1985), chap. 7 and, for the manifesto of the journal, 231–33.

11. Corbin, "La théologie dialectique et l'histoire," *Recherches philosophiques* 3 (1933): 250–84, at 252. On Corbin's later significance, see Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

obvious—beginning with Heidegger himself. (Interestingly, none other than Henry Corbin translated the first—and for a long time, only—French collection of Heidegger's writings, a defective but important rendering.) The cumulative effects were immense. According to Paul Ricoeur, the years 1936–1940 were, thanks to the Kierkegaard enthusiasm, those of the starkest intellectual life in the last century—stark-est, one might add, until the conversions from existentialism to structuralism and from structuralism to poststructuralism. Ricoeur goes so far as to comment that “Kierkegaard is at the origin of French existential phenomenology.” Indeed, in a phenomenon that all the early “histories” of existentialism tacitly recognized, the Kierkegaard enthusiasm may provide one of the best general rubrics for making sense of the evolution of French thought as the 1930s waned. As neo-Kantianism fell, a kind of “neo-Kierkegaardianism” rushed into the void.¹²

Two figures, however, thanks to their book-length studies on the subject, were absolutely beyond question the most significant in the dissemination and popularization of Kierkegaard in intellectual circles. There was first of all the émigré Russian-Jewish thinker Lev Shestov (in Paris, “Léon Chestov”), who contributed not just individually but through his leadership of a coterie of loyal disciples. And, against the background established by all of the more minor figures, there towered the philosopher Jean Wahl (also of Jewish origin). His various “Kierkegaardian studies”—the phrase he used as the title of his 1938 collection of writings from the period—were not only most important in the Kierkegaard enthusiasm in France generally but, more directly for these purposes, they were critical for Levinas's philosophical development in particular.

As it happens, Levinas wrote about Shestov during the 1930s and counted Wahl among his closest friends (indeed, he eventually dedicated *Totality and Infinity* to Wahl and his wife Marcelle). Consequently, these two figures need to be given special attention. It was in writing about Shestov, as it turns out, that Levinas first had occasion to mention his own predecessor Franz Rosenzweig in print—in fact

12. Martin Heidegger, *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?: suivi d'extraits sur l'être et une conférence sur Hölderlin*, trans. Henry Corbin (Paris: Gallimard, 1938); Paul Ricoeur, “Philosopher après Kierkegaard,” *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, 3rd ser., 13 (1963): 292–316. Mesnard, however, sees Kierkegaard supplanted by Heidegger and Jaspers in the “cénacles” of Parisian existentialism. Mesnard, “Kierkegaard aux prises,” 467. Mesnard published his own book on the Dane after the war: *Le vrai visage de Kierkegaard* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1948).

this comment dwelled on Rosenzweig in more detail than Levinas would accord him before (or even in!) *Totality and Infinity* itself. And it was in interacting with Wahl, I will suggest, that Levinas moved from the enthusiasm for Kierkegaard to thinking about transcendence in a way that steered this enthusiasm in a new direction. The figure whom everyone else saw as the distant progenitor of Martin Heidegger, Levinas wanted to conscript into his battle against this incontestably great but (briefly) National Socialist thinker. The Dane would correct the German.

LEVINAS'S INITIAL STATEMENT ON KIERKEGAARD

Lev Shestov (1866–1938, born Lev Isakovich Shvartzsman), once among the more prominent Jewish philosophers of the period, had been expelled from the new Soviet Union along with many other Russian intellectuals in 1922.¹³ After sojourning for some time in Berlin, he settled definitively in Paris, where he taught at the university before he died in the late 1930s. (Paris counted as the most important center of the Russian diaspora; Vladimir Nabokov, for example, lived there when he wrote his first novel in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.) Shestov became immensely fashionable in his old age.¹⁴ All of his older works were translated, and while he continued to write in Russian, his new books typically first came into print in French (and sometimes German) editions, published by his friends and admirers, who made up a genuine pleiad of followers. Apparently, for example, Georges Bataille studied under Shestov; he assisted in the translation of one of his works. But the most significant and devoted of Shestov's followers were the Russian-born philosopher Rachel Bepaloff and the Romanian-born poet Benjamin Fondane (1898–1944, originally Benjamin Wechsler), both of whom came to live in Paris at the time; their published work in

13. It is noteworthy, for example, that an older English-language anthology of Jewish thinkers features the work of Shestov along with Rosenzweig and Buber. See Bernard Martin, ed., *Great Twentieth-Century Jewish Philosophers: Shestov, Rosenzweig, Buber* (New York: Macmillan, 1969). It is likewise interesting that one of the founders of another kind of enthusiasm once enthused about Shestov. See Irving Kristol, "All Things Are Possible: Selection from a Jewish Existentialist Thinker," *Commentary* (January 1952): 68–71.

14. See Benjamin Fondane, *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov* (Paris: Plasma, 1982) for a record of some of his many intellectual contacts. It appears from this book (138) that he had personal interactions with Levinas in some capacity. See also Michael Weingrad, "New Encounters with Leon Chestov," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* (forthcoming) for connections to Bataille and to Walter Benjamin.

the 1930s featured both extensive appeals to Kierkegaard and elaborate homages to their more proximate intellectual master.¹⁵

Still, Shestov's direct influence outstripped that of all of his admirers. It is thanks to Shestov, for example, that Husserl initially came to be known in France, if only in the wildly distorted image available in the vituperative polemic Shestov aimed against the master of German phenomenology. Though it originally appeared in Russian in 1917, the attack only came to the attention of the West in 1926. The somewhat vulgar interpretation Shestov offered, to which Levinas's professor Jean Hering immediately responded, nonetheless had a certain impact in France, no doubt helping to sow Levinas's youthful interest in the subject, which climaxed in his dissertation on Husserl's philosophy a few years later.¹⁶

But Shestov's interests, especially by the time he settled in Paris, were wider. In the many books that appeared in the 1920s and 1930s, Shestov not only popularized proto-existentialist Russian writers like Chekhov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, but also looked back to those who now appeared, from the perspective of the vanguard, to be the pioneering founders of this movement misunderstood in their own times: Blaise Pascal, Friedrich Nietzsche, and (of course) Kierkegaard himself.¹⁷

Shestov also argued for a new conception of Judaism that opposed

15. See esp. Fondane, *La conscience malheureuse* (Paris: Plasma, 1936), with articles on Shestov, Husserl, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche; and Rachel Bepaloff, *Cheminements et carrefours* (Paris: Vrin, 1938), with articles on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Fondane died in Auschwitz in 1944. Bepaloff earned most fame through her other book *De l'Illiade*, pref. Jean Wahl (New York: Brentano's, 1943). In the English edition, *On the Iliad*, trans. Mary McCarthy (New York: Pantheon, 1945), Wahl's foreword is replaced by Hermann Broch's essay "The Style of the Mythical Age: An Introduction."

16. The feud began with Shestov, "Memento mori: A propos de la théorie de la connaissance d'Edmond Husserl," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* (January–February 1926): 5–62, and left a long paper trail, which I omit. The best treatment is in Eugene H. Frickey, "The Origins of Phenomenology in France, 1920–1940" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1979), chap. 2; on the merits, see Ramona Fotiade, "Evidence et conscience: Léon Chestov et la critique existentielle de la théorie de l'évidence chez Husserl," in Nikita Struve, ed., *Léon Chestov: Un philosophe pas comme les autres!* (Paris: Institut d'études slaves, 1996). Levinas's thesis: *La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Vrin, 1930).

17. Shestov, *La nuit de Gesthemani: Essai sur la philosophie de Pascal*, trans. Boris de Schloezer (Paris: Grasset, 1923); *Les révélations de la mort: Dostoïevsky—Tolstoy*, trans. Boris de Schloezer (Paris: Plon, 1923); *L'idée du bien chez Tolstoy et Nietzsche: Philosophie et prédication*, trans. T. Beresovski-Chestov and Georges Bataille (Paris: Editions du siècle, 1925); *La philosophie de la tragédie: Dostoïevsky et Nietzsche*, trans. Boris de Schloezer (Paris: J. Schiffrin, 1926).

it to, rather than synthesized it with, philosophy. This interpretation is epitomized in his *Athens and Jerusalem* of 1938, the two cities symbolizing for Shestov the absolute divide between the lies of reason and the truths of unreason. Shestov did not hesitate in the least to take up the charge of the latter against the dominance of the former. He saw the heritage of Greece in European culture as a misleading and tragic rationalism that, by refusing to admit the reality of the fundamental human experiences of terror, loneliness, uncertainty, and faith, left the individual all the more alone when they came.¹⁸ It is therefore not surprising that Shestov could find a source of insight and inspiration in the antiphilosophical writings of Kierkegaard in particular.

Shestov's most important book for these purposes, *Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentielle* (*Vox clamantis in deserto*), appeared in 1936, in a translation by Tatiana Rageot and Boris de Schloezer. The text, like the rest of Shestov's works of the period, provides a meditative approach, unclassifiable by the generic standards of today, that worked in the grip of passion and, undeterred by academic scruples, substituted the declamations of rhetoric for the proofs of reason. It emphasizes two points worth particular mention.

Most fundamentally, Shestov urged his strict distinction between and opposition of Western rationalism and "Eastern" faith. The blandishments of philosophy could never alter the truth that—as the subtitle of the book proposed—man is alone in a desert crying for no one to hear. The ultimate questions of existence revealed all philosophy as a pack of empty promises; only faith could hope to provide more viable answers—and precisely by refusing to comfort and reassure. This dismissal applied quite specifically to the domain of philosophy known as ethics: Western morality, especially if rooted in philosophical rationalism, the attempt to dictate formalized rules of action, only obstructed existential faith. The mistake of philosophy, Shestov insisted, is to lock out, in the service of inhuman abstraction, the absurdity of life at it is lived. The theoretical rules of morality could never apply to the actual situations of life as they are exigently experienced. "That is why," Shestov explained, "Kierkegaard turned, not to reason and morality, which demand resignation, but to the absurd and faith, which give their sanction to daring. His writings and sermons, raging, frenzied, violent, full of intensity, speak to us of nothing else: . . . a mad

18. Shestov, *Athènes et Jérusalem: un essai de philosophie religieuse*, trans. Boris de Schloezer (Paris: Flammarion, 1938).

flight from the god of the philosophers to the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob."¹⁹ Accordingly, and as Kierkegaard had so brilliantly discovered, the entire program of ethics had to be rejected for the sake of a decisive faith in a "teleological suspension of the ethical."

Levinas's 1937 review of the book, which appeared soon after its publication, is an assessment not only of Shestov but also of the Kierkegaard enthusiasm quite generally. Though brief, Levinas's article shows how deeply he rejected many of Shestov's basic premises and with them an uncritical fashion. "Kierkegaard's fortunes are by no means a fad," Levinas acknowledged near the beginning:

The moral crisis opened by the Great War has given men the sharp feeling of the *powerlessness* of reason and the critical disagreement between a rationalistic civilization and the exigencies of the particular soul lost in a generalized anonymity. It has put in question, despite the remarkable advancement of science and technology, the value, hitherto unopposed, of the Greek heritage. On this basis, in different forms, both irrationalism and doctrines of violence have been renewed.²⁰

This passage, which one is entitled to interpret as a global evaluation of the relevance and risks of the Kierkegaard enthusiasm as a whole, is interesting because it appears to take a dim view of what everyone else seemed to find so exciting. Levinas did not hesitate to include Shestov in this verdict.

After summarizing the philosophical harvest of the Kierkegaard enthusiasm—which added up, he said, essentially to the thesis of the ineffability of the individual—Levinas wrote: "Whatever response one gives to all of these questions, they have to be posed. The internal signification of all of the events that constitute my existence has to be respected, before interpreting them as a function of the universal order as constructed by reason." It may not be too much to suggest that, for Levinas, while the questions they posed were legitimate, the answers given by Kierkegaard and Shestov were mistaken. At least, Levinas applied this verdict explicitly to the most important of their conclusions. While in the 1930s Levinas might have agreed with these figures that

19. Shestov, *Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentielle*, 383–84; cf. Ronald Grimsley, "Shestov," in *The Legacy and Interpretation of Kierkegaard*, 276–77.

20. The review is in (and all quotations are from) *Revue des études juives* 52/1–2 (July–December 1937): 139–41.

faith is the answer, he could not follow them, he continued, in their exclusive definition of faith as "an enterprise full of risks, a worried faith, a religion in which the certainties are always menaced and have to be justified again and again, in which, indeed, each instant, pristine and pathetic, stands for itself and there are only new beginnings."

It is true that Levinas shows a complimentary attitude toward Shestov in some parts of the review, praising him for the brilliance of his style and presentation and recommending the book to those who wanted to renew their Judaism "as a religion, if philological research on the past of the Jewish people cannot satisfy them and if sterile homages before the 'beauty of the Ten Commandments and the ethics of the prophets' have left them cold." The dominant sense of the review, however, is the polite rejection of Shestov and his view—"those who know Shestov's works and his battle for Jerusalem against Athens will not find it surprising," Levinas noted in passing—that knowledge counted only as an "abdication of and annoyance to faith." In the final analysis, one can say that Levinas's reaction to the Kierkegaard enthusiasm, at least insofar as he found it represented in Shestov's work, is somewhere between discriminating acceptance and outright rejection. Insofar as it blended with and added to the irrationalist currents of the time, Levinas found it immensely suspect.

But Levinas sounded another interesting note. Properly interpreted, Levinas said, Kierkegaard's thought looked "more subtle" than the enthusiasm that, retrieving it from the past, also distorted it to suit the present. One of the ways in which it appeared more complex to discriminating eyes than in the typical presentation in the course of the enthusiasm, Levinas explained, involved Kierkegaard's long love affair with that most central rationalist of the Western tradition: Socrates. This element of Kierkegaard's career—which began with a dissertation on Socratic irony—definitively separated him, Levinas argued, "from any vulgar irrationalism." While the Kierkegaard enthusiasm and existential philosophy more generally threatened to "break apart the synthesis of Greece and Judeo-Christianity which the Middle Ages assumed it had secured," Kierkegaard himself appeared to express a different conclusion. For better or worse, "European consciousness does not have the strength to forget Socrates." Whatever his reputation, Levinas never rejected philosophy. He would attempt to reform it, with Kierkegaard's help, turning the suspension of the ethical into the ground of ethics.

BEYOND FRANZ ROSENZWEIG:
THE THEME OF TRANSCENDENCE

Levinas's review of Shestov's Kierkegaardianism is equally important—perhaps more important—for another reason. It is Levinas's only published mention of Franz Rosenzweig, not only in the 1930s, but also in the two decades that followed. It is therefore important to record and to interpret it properly. The review began:

The thought of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher who died in 1855, has experienced for several years now a rare fortune. Jaspers and Heidegger in Germany and Jean Wahl and Gabriel Marcel in France—these are a few of the names that allow one to measure the extent of an influence that also exercised itself, in a very obvious manner, on the only modern Jewish philosopher worthy of the name: Franz Rosenzweig.

In calling Rosenzweig "the only modern Jewish philosopher worthy of the name," Levinas tacitly suggested that Shestov does not deserve that title. He made this implication explicit later in the review: "M. Shestov, a Jewish philosopher, is not a philosopher of Judaism," Levinas wrote.

In light of the connection so often stressed in contemporary scholarship between Levinas and his great German-Jewish predecessor, one might conclude that the Kierkegaard enthusiasm itself influenced Levinas only through Rosenzweig's appropriative transformation. In *The Star of Redemption*, his enigmatic masterwork, Rosenzweig praised Kierkegaard right at the start for "contest[ing] the Hegelian integration of revelation into the whole."²¹ But in Levinas's lukewarm evaluation of the Kierkegaard enthusiasm, particularly the contribution it made to the violent irrationalism of the time, Levinas clearly implies that if he esteems Rosenzweig, it is either not for his allegiance to Kierkegaardianism or else for his transformation of the Danish philosopher's legacy.

In what sense did Rosenzweig transform Kierkegaard? As the citation indicates, Rosenzweig followed Kierkegaard's hostility to "totality," the Hegelian notion that spirit serves as an all-encompassing forum for every aspect of human existence. But the Hegelian totality that

21. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1971), 7; cf. Michael D. Oppenheim, "Søren Kierkegaard and Franz Rosenzweig: The Movement from Philosophy to Religion" (Ph.D. diss., University of California-Santa Barbara, 1976).

Kierkegaard shattered in one form, as Peter Eli Gordon has usefully emphasized, Rosenzweig reintegrated into a new one, speaking repeatedly, in his discussions of the Jewish community, of the “new unity” and the “new totality.”²² For Rosenzweig, as Levinas himself recognized, “the subjective protest is impotent” against the “historical necessity” that Hegel defended. Accordingly, Rosenzweig “remained Hegelian on one point,” because he wanted a substitute for the merely subjective outcome of “Kierkegaard and the Kierkegaardians and their protest against imprisonment in the system or in history.”²³ Levinas’s jaundiced view of Kierkegaard, one might therefore conclude, simply followed Rosenzweig’s own ultimate rejection of the Danish philosopher.

It is certainly true that Levinas adopted, out of allegiance to Rosenzweig, the Kierkegaardian opposition to Hegel while straining mightily to avoid the “subjectivist” result—what he derisively called “the vanity of a merely personal protest”—to which that opposition originally led in Kierkegaard’s own works. And yet, one can find serious limits to the hypothesis of an exact continuation from Rosenzweig to Levinas. The contemporary penchant is to find the analogies between Rosenzweig and Levinas and to leave the matter there. But the more one looks, the more plausible other influences—including Kierkegaardian contributions—become in Levinas’s formation.

There are important considerations on the level of context. As Levinas himself observed, there were no easy ways to avoid Kierkegaard even in the midst of Hegel’s Parisian apotheosis in the period after the war.²⁴ The brief triumph of Kierkegaardian existentialism in the 1930s, a decade too often presented simplistically as the incubator for postwar Hegelianism (and communism), left an indelible impression even on movements dedicated to breaking with it unceremoniously. “Kierkegaard’s philosophy has marked contemporary thought so deeply that the reservations and even the rejections it may elicit are yet forms of that influence,” Levinas remarked in the 1960s.

[T]he return of Hegelian thought and the fascination it holds are not solely attributable to the foundation it provides for the great political

22. See in general Peter Eli Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming) for a portrait of Rosenzweig made in Heidegger’s holist and communitarian image.

23. These remarks come from the colloquy that followed Levinas’s presentation, “‘Entre deux mondes’ (Biographie spirituelle de Franz Rosenzweig),” in Lévy-Valensi and Halperin, eds., *La conscience juive*, 147.

24. Michael S. Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

questions of today. . . . Neo-Hegelianism derives a kind of nobility from its reaction against the exacerbated subjectivism of existence. After one hundred years of Kierkegaardian protest, one would like to get beyond that pathos. . . . I have the impression that the seductiveness of the later Heidegger for us, and also the attractiveness of neo-Hegelianism and Marxism, perhaps even of structuralism, comes—in part of course—from a reaction to that completely naked subjectivity that, in its desire to avoid losing itself in the universal, rejects all form. [PN, 71, 76]

The anti-existentialist animus that Levinas interestingly saw as providing some of the spiritual motivation for much recent French thought, from Marxism to structuralism, never fully exorcised the subjectivism of Kierkegaard's thought. But then there is good reason to suspect that Levinas is implicated in the phenomenon he himself identified: it is important to look for the ways in which the reservations Levinas expressed against (and indeed his eventual rejection of) Kierkegaard's thought were "yet forms of . . . influence."

This likelihood raised by the context is born out in an examination of the text. The best evidence for Levinas's preference for Kierkegaard over Rosenzweig in opposing Hegel is related to the word and concept of "transcendence." For better or worse, it is in fact quite difficult to find this notion in Rosenzweig's thought, for he explicitly and repeatedly ridiculed it. It is, he argued, "the old [thinking that] addressed the problem whether God is transcendent or immanent," whereas the new thinking that Rosenzweig advocated simply drops this inquiry.²⁵ By the starkest of contrasts, transcendence is a central term and concept in Levinas's thought. Just as important, Levinas offered the transcendent other in opposition to the communitarian picture of intersubjectivity to be found in Heideggerian theory and fascistic practice; yet it is just this alarming ideology of resolute communitarianism that Rosenzweig himself insistently advocated in the portrait of the Jewish community that concludes his masterpiece.²⁶

25. Rosenzweig, "Das neue Denken," in *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken, 1937), 384.

26. Gordon argues that Rosenzweig is "alive to the 'we' of community as much as to the 'thou' of alterity," a commitment bringing him into proximity not just to Heidegger but also to Carl Schmitt. In *The Star of Redemption*, Gordon suggests, "Rosenzweig calls the founding decision of community 'dreadful' (*grauenhaft*), since the 'we' must expel the 'you' 'from its bright, melodious circle into the cold dread of the nothing.' . . . This notion of the 'We' points to Rosenzweig's profound disagreement with Levinas: For while Levinas contested totality on behalf of alterity, Rosenzweig found in Jewish solidarity a singular and self-sufficient 'Whole.' Rosenzweig was thus favorable to the very kind of holism Levinas rejected on principle" (unpublished manuscript).

Because he championed “transcendence”—the alterity of other people that resists any reduction to plenitudinous unity—Levinas’s alternative to Hegel apparently took a direction very different from the communitarian holism that Rosenzweig himself adopted. Levinas hoped for an alternative to lonely subjectivity that did not remain true to Hegel *even on one point* by simply discovering, like Rosenzweig, a different kind of whole. If not from Rosenzweig, the point of view of transcendence then had to come from somewhere else.

In his many works, Levinas presented an image of intersubjectivity hardly secularized from the theological picture of man humiliated in the presence of the divine. If Levinas is still even partially following Rosenzweig in these matters (a point of controversy too difficult to enter into here), he is also, ironically, transforming him in a Kierkegaardian direction and preserving more of Kierkegaard’s thought than Rosenzweig himself did. In his adoption of the point of view of “transcendence,” Levinas did draw on the Christian Kierkegaard—if only through the decisive intermediation of an interwar Jew like himself.

JEAN WAHL AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE THEOLOGICAL OTHER

Born in 1888, Jean Wahl, a longtime Sorbonne professor, is one of the more neglected figures in twentieth-century French intellectual history. This omission deserves to be rectified, not least in Levinas studies: the acknowledgement of Rosenzweig’s influence in *Totality and Infinity* is rarely left unemphasized when a similar homage to Wahl in the same book is invariably passed over in silence.

Wahl and Levinas likely met one another when they each spent the winter semester of 1928–29 in Freiburg studying at the feet of their phenomenological masters.²⁷ Levinas evoked his friend’s personal demeanor and philosophical contribution most memorably at a posthumous conference in his honor. “That marvelous pointillism of Jean Wahl!” Levinas exclaimed. “What a strange effect it produces,” he continued, likening it to “a child’s question coming from the lips of the wisest of philosophers.”

27. Wahl’s notes on Heidegger’s lectures later served as the basis for his authority in speaking about Heidegger in France and he cited them throughout his 1930s works. They also contributed to his own lecture courses in France on Heidegger, one of which has recently been published. See Wahl, *Introduction à la pensée de Heidegger: Cours donnés en Sorbonne de janvier à juin 1946* (Paris: Livre de poche, 1998).

In many cases, Jean Wahl may be defined as the child's question within the Trojan walls of thought. Or the shaft of light shining through the structures of doctrines, striking particular, sometimes unknown points, awakening the experience of the other philosopher in the untamed state, in which it has retained its freshness prior to becoming hardened into a system, before being buried in the depths of an intellectual construction, before the dulling of its sharp, burning punctuality.

Wahl's main contribution to French intellectual life, Levinas went on to contend, is not so much a finished system as "the rejection of the kind of thought that is content with exclusive systems."

It has been the forerunner of certain daring undertakings (which are not all unduly extreme) of current philosophy. It is fair to say that in France it has paved the way for a new kind of reader and writer in philosophy, and a new sort of book. With it, a blow was struck against the structure of the system, philosophy set up in the guise of a logical architecture, the philosopher's stronghold or domain: a hereditary domain, to be handed down to schools, disciples, epigones—an intellectual feudalism amplifying (or as some feel in our time, repressing) the meaningful and the reasonable.²⁸

Wahl's revolt against system (and even meaning) may likewise make it difficult to specify his contribution to Levinas's own development; but the insight that the attack on the systematic pretensions is something Wahl inherited from Kierkegaard's complaints against Hegel may allow some further precision.

Wahl appears at practically every significant crossroads in the complicated midcentury transfer of German thought to France—that of the Kierkegaard enthusiasm not least. He had begun his philosophical career much earlier than Levinas with a thesis, directed by Henri Bergson and dedicated to him, on the subject of time in Descartes's work. He claimed to find in all of Descartes's important doctrines, from the treatment of the *cogito* to the science of movement, the novel presumption that perception took place in the space of an instant. In light of Bergson's new philosophy of time, Wahl seemed to suggest, assumptions about the nature of time that must have informed earlier philosophies

28. Levinas, "Jean Wahl: Sans avoir ni être," in Levinas et al., *Jean Wahl et Gabriel Marcel* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976), 17–18, 27. The essay is rpt. in Levinas, *Hors sujet* (Saint Clément: Fata Morgana, 1987); the English citations here are from *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 71 and 79.

had to be reinterpreted.²⁹ It is perhaps too much of a stretch to claim that this contribution on the notion of the “moment” in Descartes prepared him for his later Kierkegaardian researches. His next book, however, certainly did. He published *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* in 1929; it provided a French perspective on the Hegelian *Jugendschriften* recently edited and published by Hermann Nohl, Johann Hoffmeister, and Georg Lasson that played such a signal role in the enthusiasm and reinterpretation of Hegel’s philosophy in existential form (in tandem with the discovery and publication of Karl Marx’s own “prescientific” and Hegelian *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*).³⁰ More importantly, Wahl’s choice of topic and method were themselves indicative of his future trajectory. “Still more than with intellectual problems,” Wahl argued in his preface,

Hegel began with moral and religious problems. The examination of his youthful fragments undertaken in this book confirms the impression one has from reading the *Phenomenology*; in their light, that text will no longer seem like just the introduction to his doctrine but also as a culmination: the narration and conclusion of his years of formation and voyage through systems.

In other words, Wahl’s choice of theme—the passages on the “unhappy consciousness” from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which he separated out in order to trace back through Hegel’s youth—already, in a sense, identified his true interest in Kierkegaard or at least primed him for it. “Behind the philosopher,” Wahl suggested, “one may discover the theologian; and behind the rationalist, the romantic.”³¹

There is no reason, of course, to insist that all of Wahl’s interests turn out actually to be about Kierkegaard; it is more the case that his work, whatever its subject, introduced figures in a heady existential brew that makes his ultimate attention to Kierkegaard seem almost foreordained. But he also presented Kierkegaard in a version almost inseparable not only from Hegel but also from Heidegger and Jaspers,

29. Wahl, *Du rôle de l’idée de l’instant dans la philosophie de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1920).

30. Wahl, *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1929).

31. *Ibid.*, v, cf. 8, 194. As Wahl later argued openly, “Kierkegaard’s thought is a protestation of unhappy consciousness against the very idea of the evolution in which Hegel considered that consciousness to have been surpassed” (*Études kierkegaardiennes* [Paris: Aubier, 1938] chap. 4, “La lutte contre le hégélianisme,” 135). He later came around, writing that one “must be wary of attributing too much historical importance to the young Hegel” (*Petite histoire de l’“existentialisme”* [Paris: Club Maintenant, 1947], 23).

whom he likewise helped naturalize. As Jean Mesnard protested of Wahl's *Études kierkegaardiennes*, "[t]his book not only devotes a direct commentary of one hundred octavo pages to the study of Heidegger and Jaspers, it never stops recalling their presence—indeed, their superiority—in the course of all the many notes that ornament the bottoms of the pages."³² The same allegation, if it is one, applies to Wahl's other famous work of the period, *Vers le concret*, which surveyed trends in philosophy around the world (including American pragmatism) but admitted, as of the third page, that Heidegger had in a sense drawn the consequences of all the new discoveries Wahl would detail—so much so that a comparison throughout would assist rather than obstruct the understanding.³³

But how did he help prepare Levinas's project? Whatever his syncretism, it is Wahl's naturalization of Kierkegaard's insistence on the infinite qualitative difference between God and man, as well as his sense of the philosophical relevance of that theme for understanding the self, that will now seem like his most important contributions. The best example is provided by his article, reprinted in the *Études kierkegaardiennes*, on *The Concept of Anxiety*. In his summary, Wahl stressed how the experience of anxiety, and particularly the individual consciousness of sin, both invalidated all philosophies of immanence and made God's shattering transcendence an irrefutable fact of life. In their most quotidian behavior, people are confusedly searching for the other. Kierkegaard's question, as Wahl rightly explained, is therefore how to convert the role of this other in the economy of selfhood from a source of menace to the grounds of beatitude. The feeling of anxiety is "tied to *the other* that is at first the indeterminate atmosphere in which I move," but, if next "interiorized and particularized so that it coincides with what is *other* in myself," could become "the other who is highest, to the absolutely *other*."³⁴ In Wahl's rendition, it is the essence of existential therapy, already in Kierkegaard's work, to discover and to make a place for the other in the experience of the self. The route to solicitude for the other may run through narcissistic self-absorption; but the ultimate destination is by no means the self alone. As

32. Mesnard, "Kierkegaard aux prises avec la tradition française," 467–68.

33. Wahl, *Vers le concret: Études d'histoire de la philosophie contemporaine* (Paris: Vrin, 1932), 3n.1: "We will often refer to Heidegger, who was deeply aware of several of the ambitions of contemporary thought." The text (with footnote) had appeared as the lead item in the first number of *Recherches philosophiques* 1 (1931–32): 1–21.

34. Wahl, *Études kierkegaardiennes*, chap. 7, "Par l'angoisse vers la hauteur," 251.

Wahl put it during the war, "The Hegelian dialectic leads us towards a vision of the whole," while Kierkegaard's opposite approach results in "a sort of nude and blind contact with the Other."³⁵

If Kierkegaard is a "solipsist" only so far as *human* others are concerned, then he would have to be not so much attacked as appropriated for simply human relations if a secular philosophy of intersubjectivity is the goal. But Wahl not only identified a kind of theological template for Levinas's doctrine in Kierkegaard's works; Wahl himself clearly meant to translate Kierkegaard to France in a philosophical and not simply theological register. Differently put, Wahl's interpretation went exactly in the opposite direction from the one that Shestov proposed: he hoped to make Kierkegaard a welcome guest at the philosophical table that Kierkegaard, on Shestov's reading, had intended to overturn.

Not surprisingly, as Wahl's book chapters appeared in article form throughout the 1930s, Shestov determined that this secular and philosophical appropriation had to be rejected root and branch. "Something needs to be said so that Wahl's 'interpretation' is not unopposed," Shestov complained in conversation with Benjamin Fondane.³⁶ When Shestov's articles did not interrupt Wahl's appropriation, Fondane, in a remarkably malicious review article that also attacked Besseloff and de Rougemont, renewed the ferocious attack. He stormily attacked Wahl for the mistake of attempting to sever Kierkegaard's thought from theology, as when Wahl saw fit to praise Kierkegaard "even if the religious that he describes does not correspond to any reality." Yet Wahl's true error, apparently, lay elsewhere. Even more abominably, Wahl had reduced Kierkegaard to a theorist—of anxiety, sin, whatever—rather than understanding his books as *enactments* of faith. For Fondane as for Shestov, any reading and therefore writing about Kierkegaard required living with him through what he suffered and achieved. "I have learned that according to Wahl, Kierkegaard did thus and so. But what about you? For when I read you, my dear Wahl, I am interested more in you than in Kierkegaard himself; I want to know what *you* think, what *your* torments are, *your* disquietudes. . . . It is strange to say, but if you would speak about yourself, I would know better what you think of

35. Wahl, "Realism, Dialectic, and the Transcendent," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4/4 (June 1944): 498.

36. Fondane, *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov*, 83; cf. 127–28, 140–41, 143. By contrast, thirty years after their publication, Levinas acknowledged Wahl's *Études* in print as the product of "the most complete, penetrating, and philosophical of Kierkegaard's historians." Levinas, "Existenz und Ethik," 153n.1.

Kierkegaard.³⁷ In this debate among Jews about the meaning of Christian knighthood, the professorial Wahl did not oblige his critic. As indicated by his polite but firm response to this unprovoked attack, Wahl wanted to choose the way of rational philosophy rather than irrational faith; though he interested himself in Kierkegaard's existential analysis, he did not follow Kierkegaard in the same fideistic and committed sense that Shestov and his followers did.³⁸

As their careers progressed, both Wahl and Levinas continued to show themselves actively interested in the possible detachment of transcendence from background theological conceptions. It is historically important that Wahl moved furthest in this direction and against Levinas's resistance—most clearly when he began, in the mid-1930s, to contribute to the vogue of the notion of transcendence by turning from historical commentator to independent philosopher.

THE QUEST FOR A SECULAR PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSCENDENCE

On 4 December 1937, Wahl staged an international event that Levinas later recalled as "his famous lecture [*sa fameuse communication*]."³⁹ Not surprisingly, this central debate in the French philosophical community of the 1930s concerned the secular fate of transcendence. Wahl's lecture, entitled "Subjectivity and Transcendence," appeared that year in the *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* along with the transcription of a colloquy among Wahl, Gabriel Marcel, and Nicholas Berdyaev, as well as written responses from Heidegger, Levinas, Bessaloff, de Rougemont, Karl Jaspers, Karl Löwith, and Raymond Aron, among others.⁴⁰ Levinas later paid homage to the book version of this debate—*Existence humaine et transcendance*, published only in 1944 in Switzerland—in his own most famous work, *Totality and Infinity* ("I have drawn much inspiration from the themes evoked in

37. Fondane, "Héraclite la pauvre; ou, Nécessité de Kierkegaard," *Cahiers du Sud* 22/177 (November 1935): 762, 765.

38. Wahl, "A propos de Kierkegaard," *Cahiers du Sud* 22/178 (December 1935): 861–62. In a footnote, Wahl noted that he would accept neither the designation of "Kierkegaardian" nor that of "Kierkegaard's disciple."

39. Levinas et al., *Jean Wahl*, 28.

40. See *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 37/5 (October–December 1937): 161–63, 166–211. By total coincidence, Léon Brunschvicg, the chairman of the session, announced the sad news that the same Henri Delacroix who had written the first analysis of Kierkegaard in France had died the previous day.

that study").⁴¹ It provides unparalleled insight into the development of Levinas's ideas at this moment and in general.

The central question Wahl raised in his essays was whether Kierkegaard's theological conception of transcendence rules out a secular conception. He understood why some might doubt it in light of Kierkegaard's work. For while Kierkegaard "does not completely deny the 'other,' he often (not always) reduces existence to a meditation on a single other: God." The question had therefore to be posed. In attempting to bring the other into the world, Wahl asked, could the existentialist follower of Kierkegaard "completely deliver [himself] from the theological elements of Kierkegaardian thought?"⁴²

Not everyone accepted the importance of this question. Denis de Rougemont offered this blunt rejection: "But why," he asked, "purify philosophy of theology? . . . For myself, I cannot conceive of any concrete relation with transcendence that lacked the touch of the divine or the sacred." Others showed deeper interest in the problems Wahl had posed. Berdyaev, in a move Levinas would also champion, insisted on the "very great difference" between the notion of transcendence and "the simple proposition that there is a reality beyond, an absolute reality, God, heaven, what have you. For transcendence is an existential experience or occurrence." The thrust of the debate in the 1930s is that, if theology is to be made philosophy, then transcendence defined as subjective experience will have to be detached from transcendence as mythologized in the various dogmatic propositions of the historical faiths.⁴³

What is crucial for the intellectual historian in this debate, I want to argue, is the way in which Levinas resisted the penchant to understand Kierkegaard and Heidegger as continuous and instead cast the other's transcendence as portrayed by Kierkegaard as the fundamental alternative to Heidegger's immanent philosophy of being-in-the-world. Wahl's proposition had been that the contemporary existential-

41. See Wahl, *Existence humaine et transcendance* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1944); Levinas, *TI*, 35n.2. Cf. Levinas, "Jean Wahl and Feeling," a review of Wahl's 1953 treatise on metaphysics (*PN*, 110–18).

42. *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, 162. Kierkegaard, according to Wahl, left the problem not only whether this conception could admit of a secular translation but, even if it could, whether self and other would find themselves alone in their dyad to the exclusion of the world. Wahl also introduced a conceptual distinction between what he dubbed "transascendence" and "transdescendence" which, as the terms imply, have some directionality.

43. *Ibid.*, 204, 187.

ists Heidegger and Jaspers appeared merely to "secularize" [*laïciser*] Kierkegaard's work; in wondering whether one could secularize Kierkegaard's "other," Wahl had missed the fact that for Heidegger the discovery of the other is not a goal, and transcendence is therefore fundamentally rethought. For Levinas, Wahl's formulation of the problem as one of secularizing translation understated the radicalism of Heidegger's attempt to abolish the problem of transcendence or, more accurately put, to substitute "ontological difference" for the intersubjective other (whether human or divine).

As background, it is crucial to know how Heidegger had dealt with the subject. In his important essay "On the Essence of the Ground," Heidegger had explicitly defined transcendence initially as *self*-transcendence, the refusal of the self to be like a static thing and as always in movement; and then, and more fundamentally, as transcendence from existents to existence.⁴⁴ These arguments marginalized not just the traditional religious definition of God's transcendence of the world, so important to Kierkegaard, but also *any possible secular theory of the transcendence of one existent over another*.

Levinas followed Berdyaev's appeal to the existential fact that some kinds of this interpersonal transcendence are rooted in experience, while the theologies of different religious sects are extrapolated from those more universal intimations. For Levinas, "the problems to which theology furnishes the solutions are entirely independent of it; they come into view by virtue of the simple fact that men exist." In other words, existential problems appeared to be those that both underwrote all sects and were therefore, in a sense, the subject they all presupposed and were really about before they diverged into controversy.⁴⁵

More crucially, Levinas argued that the concept of transcendence is one that Heidegger had intended not to secularize but instead to overcome. For Levinas, "the form that existential philosophy takes in Heidegger's thought distances itself as far as possible from theology." He explained his definition of secularization: "Whatever the role of theology in Heidegger's intellectual formation, everyone should grant that, for him, to secularize a notion cannot simply mean camouflaging its religious dimension. *Secularization must involve an operation which ends by truly surpassing the theological point of view.*" The point at

44. Heidegger, "Vom Wesen des Grundes," *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* 8 (1929): 1-138, rpt. in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1967).

45. *Bulletin de la Société*, 194.

which Heidegger made this attempt, Levinas said, counted as "the touchiest [*le plus névralgique*] of his philosophy."⁴⁶

As Levinas argued, the discourse of the encountered other, whether in religious and theological or secular or existential form, is *ontic*. It concerned the "transcendence" between two beings. But the entire point, as well as the "great interest," of Heidegger's work, Levinas said, "consists in showing that at the base of man's *ontic* adventure there is something more than a relation of one 'existent' with another: there is the comprehension of being more fundamentally." And "human existence . . . only interests Heidegger because it allows a penetration to ontology." For Heidegger, human existence, and therefore the forum of religious or interpersonal transcendence, is (supposedly) not of independent interest.⁴⁷ At this point Levinas could draw his most important conclusion. For Heidegger, transcendence "does not mean . . . the relation [*passage*] of one 'existent' to another, but that of the existent towards being." Accordingly, "Heidegger breaks with theology exactly insofar as he makes the distinction between the *ontic* and the *ontological* (and he makes it with a radicalism without precedent in the history of philosophy)."⁴⁸

While Levinas did not criticize Heidegger in so many words, there is more in the comments than simple clarification. There is a fundamental alternative presented in the way Levinas structured the prob-

46. *Ibid.* (emphasis added). In his letter, Löwith understood Heidegger's relation to theology to be even more paradoxical: "Jaspers's philosophy is, at bottom, *ersatz* religion, in spite of the fact that Jaspers is essentially an antitheological partisan of the Enlightenment. In contrast, Heidegger's philosophy is anti-Christian, in spite of the fact that—or even because—he has remained essentially a theologian. . . . In Heidegger, one still senses an immediately religious motivation at work—only it is perverted" (*Ibid.*, 204). Löwith had contributed to the French Kierkegaard enthusiasm with his article, "L'achèvement de la philosophie classique par Hegel et sa dissolution chez Marx et Kierkegaard," *Recherches philosophiques* 4 (1934–35), later incorporated into his famous history of nineteenth-century thought, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*.

47. *Bulletin de la Société*, 194–95. Heidegger's intervention in the debate is not surprising in this light. Long before the *Letter on Humanism*, he wrote simply to say that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, he did not practice *Existenzphilosophie* and, in a prefiguration of his postwar *Letter*, to insist that "the question with which I am concerned is not that of man's existence; it is the question of being as a whole and by itself." As for the existentialism beginning to rule Paris, Heidegger said, it seemed exposed to the "twin danger that it will collapse into theology or else dissolve into abstraction." Wahl replied somewhat unconvincingly that, all the same, by Heidegger's own lights, existential philosophy provided the only means of approach to the problem of being. It seemed strange, to Wahl, for Heidegger now to disown what he had himself helped invent. *Ibid.*, 193.

48. *Ibid.*, 195.

lem. A choice has to be made. It determines what philosophical meaning, if any, "transcendence" will have. *Either* one remains at the level of the existent *or* one descends, with Heidegger, to the plane of being. *Either* the level of existents, and transcendence between and among them, *or* the plane of their being, and transcendence toward it. In effect, Levinas suggested that even the secular theory of interpersonal transcendence that Wahl wanted to develop presupposed the Kierkegaardian experience of the other's transcendence that, far from secularizing, Heidegger analytically marginalized.

Levinas did not join Wahl's quest for a secularized conception of transcendence as emphatically in the interwar debate as he would later; indeed, Levinas's 1937 comments suggest that a full commitment to secular philosophy might require the radical redefinition of transcendence that Heidegger offered. But a focus on this difference in the 1930s would occlude the deeper premise that Wahl and Levinas shared. It consisted in a preference for Kierkegaard's interpersonal definition of transcendence against the ontological definition that Heidegger pioneered. When Levinas later tried to make his own philosophy of intersubjective transcendence purely secular, he would do so, it bears noting, in spite of the implication of his own argument from the 1930s that an intersubjective definition of transcendence remained crypto-theological rather than secular, ultimately dependent on the relation between God and man that it tried to cast in purely human terms. Secularization must involve an operation that ends by truly surpassing the theological point of view.

KIERKEGAARD ALIVE

I have thus suggested that the philosophy of the other which is now so commonplace, in manifold forms, is historically speaking a kind of "ethical theology" (on the model of Carl Schmitt's political theology). Already in the interwar period, I have tried to show, Levinas came to defend a Kierkegaardian theology of self and other as an *alternative* to Heideggerian ontology (not its precursor). This essay must leave aside the interesting finale of Levinas's Kierkegaard journey except to note that he came to believe he had found a way to preserve the Kierkegaardian solicitude for the other without the theological foundation he had earlier supposed it might require.⁴⁹ Ironically, Levinas's mature de-

49. Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Theology and Humanity, 1928–1961* (forthcoming).

fense of a purely human and secular ethics in *Totality and Infinity* brought him back to his own demand against Shestov for a rationalist Kierkegaard as well as to Wahl's project of finding a secular one.

Not that anyone paid attention to Levinas at the time. "In a sense," Georges Bataille perceptively noted, "Emmanuel Levinas has situated himself outside of 'French existentialism,' if that expression refers to a unified group epitomized by Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty."⁵⁰ Levinas attempted a neo-Kierkegaardianism different enough from the reigning, Sartrean version of the fashion to be ignored for decades. In fact, the triumph of existentialism went so far that Levinas felt free to assimilate the Kierkegaard on whom he had drawn to the Heidegger and Sartre whom he philosophically rejected. When Jean Wahl—initially interned at Drancy⁵¹ in 1941 and then, after a fortunate release, a professor at the New School and Mount Holyoke during the war—staged another colloquium in 1946 that, like the one the decade before, gathered many of the leaders of the Parisian philosophical field together for a contentious attempt to clarify together the spirit of the age, Levinas made evident his distance from the new movement, to the point of obscuring his recourse to one existentialist to respond to another.

In his interventions, Levinas reduced the Kierkegaard enthusiasm as it had occurred in Germany and France to Heidegger's thought, as if there were no point to discussing Kierkegaard and the controversy were really about Heidegger himself. It was as though, far from paving the way for Heidegger, as other interpreters argued, Kierkegaard had been revived only because he had approached, without reaching, the independent content of Heidegger's own analyses.

It is possible that behind each phrase of Heidegger there is some Kierkegaardian thought—certainly, Kierkegaard was well known in Germany and even in France, as Henri Delacroix and Victor Basch had written on him at the beginning of this century—but it is thanks to Heidegger that this train of thought has sounded a philosophical note. I mean that, prior to Heidegger, Kierkegaard was confined to the provinces of essay, psychology, aesthetics, or theology, and that after Heidegger, he came into the purview of philosophy.

50. Georges Bataille, "De l'existentialisme au primat de l'économie," *Critique* 3/21 (February 1948): 126.

51. See Jean Wahl, "Poèmes (Drancy 1941)," *Fontaine* 32 (1944): 135–50, rpt. in Wahl, *Poèmes* (Montreal: Editions de l'Arbre, 1945).

In a sense, if Kierkegaard counted as important *philosophically*, it is only because Heidegger did first.⁵²

And yet, Levinas's (questionable) historiographical assimilation of Kierkegaard to Heidegger in the postwar era may have led him to forget the interwar history of his own philosophical recourse to the Dane's search for the divine other in overcoming the German's all-too-human communitarianism. This recourse left clear legacies not just in his vocabulary—whenever he spoke of the “transcendence” of the “other”—but in his concepts, too. I have suggested how this occurred historically. And in Levinas's philosophical masterpiece, *Totality and Infinity*, the essence of Kierkegaard's defense of the individual against history and his depiction of the self's relation to a higher other remain strong—indeed, central—elements.

The rejection of history is prominent in the book among his opening moves. The viewpoint of morality, Levinas explained, is opposed to the Hegelian vision of politics, which necessarily involves the slaughter-bench. The irreducibility of the individual that Levinas calls, in *Totality and Infinity*, “separation,” shows the limits of the Hegelian philosophy of history, which denies the significance of separation in order to integrate each individual into a larger story than himself. The consciousness of separation is different from—indeed, the disconfirmation of—the historical point of view. The self, thanks to separation, must always understand itself as *in medias res* and therefore unsublatable, even projectively, into some larger epic. The point of view of the last man, therefore, betrays the very history whose final meaning the Hegelian claims to deduce. The individual refuses to be reduced to “a pure loss figuring in an alien accounting system” of the recollective owl's sweeping comprehension of the whole. Instead, “[t]he real must not only be determined in its historical objectivity, but also from interior intentions, from the *secrecy* that interrupts the continuity of historical time” (*TI*, 56, 57–58).⁵³

52. Wahl, *Petite histoire*, 83. As Wahl convincingly replied, this interpretation completely ignored important features of the enthusiasm: “It is not [necessarily] through Heidegger that one discovers Kierkegaard, even if, sociologically and historically speaking, many have done so [some people would not have cared to read Hegel if Marx had not existed]. It is not from Heidegger that the historians of thought like Delacroix and Basch (and a good many Germans) found out about Kierkegaard. Moreover, many discovered him not through Heidegger but through Barth, whom Levinas has not mentioned.” *Ibid.*, 87.

53. Man “is uprooted from history,” Levinas concluded, when he “truly approaches the other” (*TI*, 52). With apparent inconsistency, Levinas also remarked, a few pages ear-

As for the better known theme of the infinitely different and higher other, it is true that Levinas attempted, in his portrait of intersubjectivity, to “singularize” the ethical relation so that it would escape the strictures against generality that had led Kierkegaard himself to reject ethics. “Is the relation to the Other that entering into, and disappearing within, generality?” Levinas asked. “*That is what must be asked in opposition to Kierkegaard as well as in opposition to Hegel*” (PN, 72). But it is, in a sense, only by importing the singularity of what Kierkegaard found in the leap of faith to God back into the ethical stage that allowed Levinas to make this innovation. For Levinas, the unique alterity of the Kierkegaardian divine is to be found in every human other. Even as the French continued their obsession with Kierkegaard, as illustrated most dramatically by the Unesco conference of 1964 entitled “Kierkegaard Alive,” Levinas had gone beyond Kierkegaard—but perhaps only, I have argued in this essay, thanks to partially Kierkegaardian means.⁵⁴

EPILOGUE: BETWEEN MORALITY AND POLITICS

It thus turns out that the “immodest” Kierkegaard, transformed from a violent knight of faith to a peaceful emissary of morality, founded a crusade in theology that Levinas continued in ethics. If Kierkegaard’s separation of the self and his hostility to history left profound legacies in Levinas’s thought, these legacies were not always persuasive. They cast light, I believe, on the depth of Levinas’s philosophical affiliation with the Kierkegaardian movement. Whether or not he valuably re-configured Kierkegaard, Levinas’s implausible distinction of individual morality from collective politics may have taken his affiliation with Kierkegaard too far.

The stark opposition of morality to politics appears most strikingly in Levinas’s inaugural Talmudic readings of the early 1960s on the subject of Jewish messianism. In a creative interpretation of a debate between Shmuel and Jochanan in Tractate Sanhedrin, Levinas—not coincidentally—claimed to find an early version of the conflict between Hegelians and Kierkegaardians that obsessed his own contemporaries, the “proponents and adversaries of Marxism, that is, the entire think-

lier in the same book, that the encounter with the other takes place “*within the totality and history*” (TI, 23).

54. See the proceedings, Jean-Paul Sartre et al., *Kierkegaard vivant* (cited above).

ing world of this mid-twentieth century" (*PN*, 71).⁵⁵ In Levinas's view, Jochanan and Shmuel were debating whether the hypothetical end of history in the advent of the messianic age would lead to a complete resolution of human problems—moral as well as political—or whether, because human life is defined by the exigency of ethical commitment, moral problems can never disappear (*DF*, 62–63).

For the *marxisant* Jochanan, Levinas explains, the end of days is not just a political concept. It would, rather, bring the complete purification and regularization of human life. For Shmuel, in contrast, it is not expectable that moral problems will vanish in the messianic age.

Contrary to Shmuel, who does not . . . separate the messianic era from the difficulties encountered by morality . . . Rabbi Jochanan envisages a pure and gracious spiritual life that is in some way stripped of the heavy load of things which is made concrete by economics. In his vision one can have direct relationships with the Other, who no longer appears as poor but as a friend; there are no more professions, only arts; and the economic repercussions of actions no longer have any bearing. Rabbi Jochanan in some way believes in the ideal of a disincarnated spirit, of total grace and harmony, an ideal exempt from any drama; while Shmuel, on the other hand, feels the permanent effort of renewal demanded by this spiritual life. [*DF*, 62–63]

Shmuel's beautiful position, with which Levinas clearly sympathizes, does not necessarily turn a blind eye to the difficulties of human interrelationships, even though it denies that these are implicated in any way in the end of days. Instead, Shmuel reserves the perfection of human relationships on a moral level for "the future world" (it is not always familiar to Jews, Levinas remarks, that Judaism distinguishes between messianic times and the future world). Crucially, however, the future world is outside of history; for this reason, the end of history in the messianic days does not bring it about.

The domain of morality, then, is not and never history. The singularity of the interpersonal relation is distinguished and exempted from the vagaries of historical—and therefore political—life. As Levinas explains, for Shmuel the "future" world is paradoxically out of time. It "concerns a personal and intimate order, lying outside the achievements of history. . . . The future world cannot be announced by a

55. I have discussed what follows from a different angle and in more detail in "Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Readings: Between Tradition and Invention," *Prooftexts*, forthcoming.

prophet addressing everyone. . . . The personal salvation of men . . . escapes the indiscretion of the prophets; no one can fix in advance the itinerary of this adventure" (*DF*, 60–61). The exigencies of morality that everyone faces, in other words, are eternal rather than historical. The moral adventure—the real quest each person must discharge—is reserved for interpersonal intimacy rather than mass conflict. If obligations are to hold, it is not going to be up to politics and history and collectives; it is going to be up to each person alone. The personal is, precisely, not political.

In such passages, Levinas is evidently following Rosenzweig: improvising, like his predecessor, on the exilic topos of Israel the witness to the nations, the haven of perpetuity subsisting peacefully in the midst of the internecine belligerence of the powers, eternal witnesses to their merely historical conflicts. But whereas Rosenzweig is a particularist, Levinas is a universalist. Insofar as Levinas wanted to extend the monitory and testimonial role that Rosenzweig reserved to Jews to the individual subject of any faith or none, one can find Kierkegaard too—the suprasectarian and post-Christian Kierkegaard with whom several important philosophers of Jewish origin identified (or whom they partly invented) in the interwar period. It is not beside the point that Jews played such a surprising and prominent role in the French Kierkegaard enthusiasm of the age. "Hitler," the Kierkegaardian Albert Camus later went so far as to exclaim, "was history in its purest form."⁵⁶ The Kierkegaard enthusiasm helped Levinas to the point of arguing, beyond and against Rosenzweig, that there is a Jew in each person and he is morality.

The all-consuming cataclysm of the war, and the turbulence that has ensued, have in many quarters made Levinas's non- or suprahistorical ethics attractive. It may even have an unexpected but real compatibility with the widespread contemporary fatigue with ideology, which is a reminder that the same periods that allow concerned moralists to come to the fore are often just as propitious for self-congratulatory moralizers. In this regard, it is interesting to note that even in the immediate postwar and post-Holocaust age, many—including many Jews—insisted on the stubborn tendency of history to resume and rejected the standpoint of pure morality as altogether too comfortable to believe or to accept. The restoration of Levinas's Talmudic readings

56. Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, tr. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage, 1954), 150.

from his book *Difficult Freedom* to the colloquies in which they began shows that the battle of Hegel and Kierkegaard continued to rage and that not everyone took Levinas's side. Politics, some insisted, is not the opposite of morality but rather the true forum of moral opportunity. Wladimir Rabi complained, in response to Levinas's presentation, that "it is simply an alibi to search for eternity, for it amounts to the refusal of choice before the problems that interest the modern world." And even if Levinas's interest in restricting the scope of politics turns out to have been shared by many of his coreligionists, the lengths to which he took his Kierkegaardian perspective did not win universal assent. It seemed to his audience that the very importance of morality justified a different and more compatible understanding of politics than Levinas articulated. Émile Touati, for example, asked whether it is, in the end, possible to distinguish the two realms; Robert Aron wondered whether the exclusion of the Jews from history ignored the role messianism accords to human beings to participate in God's design through politics and hasten the end of days; the veteran Wahl, always present, objected similarly, and in spite of his Kierkegaardian credentials, to the "pre-tense" involved in the wish to live outside of history.⁵⁷

These criticisms point to potentially severe defects in the approach that makes the availability of the other in ethics depend on the immunity of the moral from the historical and the ethical from the political. In the Marxist atmosphere of Parisian intellectual life in the crucial decade of the 1950s, when Levinas's thought climaxed, the Kierkegaardian opposition to history and politics may have functioned as a useful antidote to an immoral fashion. But that the Hegelian obsession may not have justified the Kierkegaardian vogue even then is suggested by the book-length indictment of the movement in the *début* of the American liberal Judith Shklar. "In his beautiful defense of the eternally human values of indignation against revolutions justified by historical reason," Shklar commented in *After Utopia*, her panoramic reconstruction of the thought of a host of significant figures in the period, "Kierkegaard's disgust at Hegel's bland systematization of evil [returns]." As she insightfully argued, this disgust often seemed purely

57. Lévy-Valensi and Halperin, eds., *La conscience juive*, 138, 287–88, 144. Levinas's promising response: "An 'existence outside of history' . . . does not mean, as M. W. Rabi supposes, the comfort of neutrality, of passive expectation, of non-engagement, the ivory tower, the perspective of Sirius. . . . To live an eternal life is to have the power of judging history without waiting for it to end" (*Ibid.*, 147). Cf. Lévy-Valensi and Halperin, eds., *La conscience juive face à l'histoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), 3–148.

reactive, leading into the blind alley of "alienation," a result as potentially nefarious as the *engagement* it simply reversed. "Totalitarianism," she commented, "has only intensified the romantic's sense of apartness from history. . . . [I]n this extreme alienation lies also an admission of futility, for history is now too far from [him] to be even understood."⁵⁸

Is this remark applicable to Levinas's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, rooted as they are in the same Kierkegaardian movements, produced during the same period, and in response to the same threats?⁵⁹ In response to the danger that it is, I will conclude by noting the obvious. The polarization between morality and politics creates the mistaken impression that while morality is safe and certain, beautiful and perfect, politics is shadowy and fallen, even soiled and dirty. Yet even eternal moral principles, should they turn out to exist, would require a politics; indeed, one could say that the belief in their immediate relevance to the political world is itself a moral necessity. One may understandably want to ask, in response to the much-discussed "ethical turn" among Western intellectuals, whether a moral doctrine that claims to be outside and above politics is plausible on moral grounds.⁶⁰

But more fundamentally and troublingly, I think, it is implausible to distinguish entirely or shield completely the domain of interpersonal and face-to-face transactions where Levinas saw morality oper-

58. Judith N. Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 130.

59. Cf. Fritz R. Stern, "The Political Consequences of the Unpolitical German," in *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany* (New York: Knopf, 1971). It is interesting that Levinas attempted to preserve the *grounds* for Rosenzweig's opposition to Zionism in his own Zionist vision. One possible criticism of this version of Zionism is obvious: by adopting the fiction that Jews are not political, it is blind to their inevitably political actions.

60. There are many forms of the excessively acute contrast between morality and politics. As Michael Ignatieff has noted, "[h]uman rights activism likes to portray itself as an anti-politics, in defense of universal moral claims meant to delegitimize 'political' (i.e., ideological or sectarian) justifications for the abuse of human beings," but this self-understanding is an "illusion." Ignatieff et al., *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 9, 29. Meanwhile Jacques Derrida's preservation of the strict opposition between morality and politics (or justice and law) in his attempt to outline a politics of the Levinasian other seems to lead only (in Dominick LaCapra's apt description) "in the direction of an unguardedly hyperbolic stress on the enigmatic call of an open or empty utopia" and to "the hope-against hope of . . . a messianic, ecstatic, even wonder-struck expectancy whose fulfillment is impossible or endlessly deferred." LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 197, 218. Both comments suggest the need for a more immediate connection or blurred distinction between morality and politics.

ating from mass politics and collective history. If a transhistorical theory of intersubjectivity, such as the one Levinas offered, is important to develop, it has to be a theory open to (if not compatible with) the lesson of modern social theory that the profoundest intimacies of human interactions are affected by their historical moment and tinged and often tainted by the power relationships of collective politics. In coming to a skeptical point of view on the premise that morality and politics are absolutely and generically different, one may well want to avoid the equal and opposite extreme, Friedrich Engels's irresponsible emphatic rejection of "any moral dogma whatsoever as an eternal, ultimate, and forever immutable ethical law on the pretext that the moral world . . . has its permanent principles which stand above history."⁶¹ All the same, *la morale pour la morale* seems little better than *la politique pour la politique*. A beautiful soul is no real substitute for dirty hands.

It is perhaps a great irony, but it is nonetheless true, that Kierkegaard has, through Levinas's appropriation, inadvertently but in the end uncontestedly helped teach European philosophy how to be moral. Yet just as each person must learn to live, somehow, both in biographical and historical time, each must learn, somehow, to be more than moral. The viewpoint of morality, though it is essential, is by itself not enough. The line between morality and politics, because it is relative, is constantly and necessarily crossed. If so, this activity, even when undertaken in the name of the morality Levinas movingly defended, will have to occur in spite of his immunization of the self from history and the truths of ethics from the affairs of the day. There is a burden of responsibility, but there is even more to shoulder.

61. As cited from the *Anti-Dühring* in Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 11. Lukes argues that Hegel's and Marx's (and Jochanan's?) subordination of morality to politics, though from one point of view an attack on morality, is from another perspective simply a different moral vision.